

# Concentrate on the

# ABCs

by LCdr. Dan Lee

Our mission was simple: sunny, clear, daytime carrier qualifications in the southern California operating areas. The only thing complicating the scenario was the timing. It was early in our IDTC and our first period back to sea in several months. Even though everyone was wanted to do well, we had emphasized taking things slow. We needed to learn how to walk again before we could run. “Concentrate on the ABCs” was the motto.

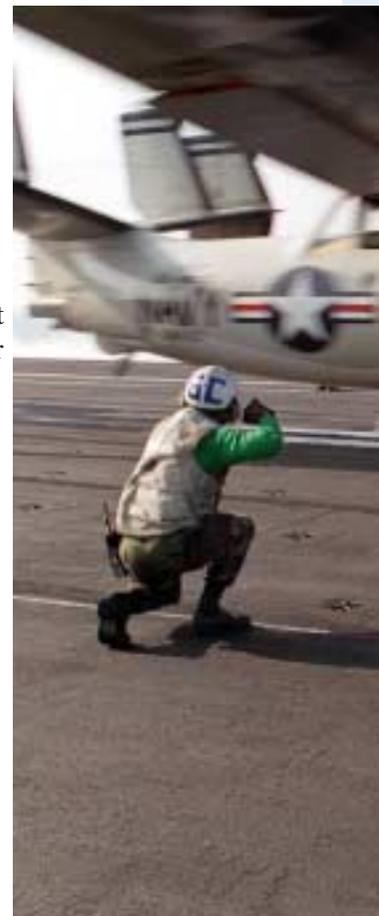
During the first day, the deck was busy, even though we were working only three Hummers and a half-dozen Hornets. The deck was clear because everyone else was going to fly out in the following days. After bagging a few traps, we needed gas before getting another pass for the pilot to finish his day qual. We trapped, then taxied clear of the landing area, then aft on the street and then turned to face the LSO platform, stopping just forward and to port of the island.

While we refueled near the Six Pack, the deck kept working several Hornets from the landing area, toward elevator 2 and then forward to wait in line for cat 1. During one of these maneuvers, a yellowshirt turned a Hornet a little too close to the Hummer’s tail with a little too much power. Our E-2 shuddered. It felt like we had been crunched.

After filling up, we taxied forward and joined the queue for cat 1. We were directed into position for launch, crossed the jet-blast deflector, and spread the wings. The final checkers verified aileron deflections. When the shooter looked aft, the final checkers gave him a thumbs-up. Then he looked forward before touching the deck.

Just as the shooter was turning to look forward, the Hawkeye flight-deck coordinator (FDC) noticed what appeared to be excessive movement of the lower port rudder tab and a small tear in the upper edge. He immediately signaled to suspend the launch, but we were already on our way. We launched and turned to enter the Case I pattern for the last trap of the period.

The FDC quickly contacted the tower, which passed the message about the suspected damage along to our aircraft. The aircrew did not



feel any controllability changes and trapped.

After landing, we checked the rudder and downed the aircraft because of a three-inch tear in the lower port rudder tab. The rudder-tab-linkage fitting had also been sheared, disconnecting the rudder tab from the flight controls.

Investigating the incident included interviews and examination of flight deck and plat tapes to identify how and when the damage occurred. Unfortunately, none of the recordings captured the incident, leading to the conclusion that the damage occurred while we were refueling. The shudder we felt could only have been caused by a Hornet's exhaust, which forced the Hummer's rudder from 20-degree throw limits to nearly 80 degrees. It hit the adjacent elevator tab.

Writing the hazard report on the incident, I struggled to identify the most important points to be made that would benefit other squadrons. Was it that excessive power was used to taxi on the flight deck or that an aircraft was directed too close to another? Had our aircrew and deck personnel failed

to let someone know about the violent shake or make note of the subsequent damage? Did everyone follow launch procedures properly and if so, how did a damaged aircraft get off the deck?

Other issues included our SOP for how and when control wipeouts should be done. All of these are pertinent points that we discussed with our CAG and the ship's crew, subsequently focusing the HAZREP on excessive jet exhaust as the first link in the chain.

The hazards associated with excessive power on the flight deck are well known: Equipment gets damaged, toppled or flight-deck personnel get knocked down or hurt. However, on occasion, a pilot needs to use the throttles to taxi, negotiate a turn, or troubleshoot. In these cases, pilots should control the risks by asking permission from the tower. The Boss and MiniBoss have the best perspective to detect hazards and help mitigate risk to personnel and hardware. Taxi directors and aircrew must also remain vigilant about the consequences of directing and moving aircraft on the flight deck close to other aircraft.

The second link in the chain was the aircrew. Feeling the shudder, we could have called a troubleshooter to inspect the tail or called the tower since the shudder was, in our experience, larger than normal. Then perhaps we could have detected the damage and stopped the launch. The flight-deck crew didn't notice anything unusual,

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either. There were a lot of new float-coats working the deck, concentrating on getting aircraft gassed up and ready to launch.

Although many of these folks were working the flight deck for the first time, there were other people with enough experience to sense when things weren't normal. They, too, could have alerted the FDC when the aircraft was buffeted by the exhaust. That could have broken the chain.

The last link was the final checkers. During a launch, our final checkers routinely verify the wings are spread and locked, the ailerons work, the engine nacelles were clean, and the panels secure. Walking aft along the fuselage, they look over the tail section and then walk back forward before positioning themselves outboard of the engine and slightly aft of the wing line. In this particular case, the final

checker obviously didn't notice the damaged rudder tab.

Feeling pressure to get the aircraft launched and with little more than 15 seconds to complete all their checks, it's not surprising they missed the damage. The final-check process is a vital step in the larger picture of launching aircraft and cannot be abbreviated. If we had taken another five or ten seconds before we launched (hardly a catastrophic delay to the deck cycle during CQ), our aircraft would not have left the deck.

Review your procedures and how your folks are doing their jobs. If something doesn't seem right, speak up. We will never be able to eliminate the risks of the flight deck, but if we practice our ABCs in and around the carrier, we will avoid Class A, B, or C mishaps. 

LCdr. Lee flies with VAW-113.

